

In this collection of short stories, we travel through time along the East Coast, watching people struggle with questions of love, justice, friendship and betrayal. Loneliness and love combine with environmental and ethical questions as our protagonists face their demons. Some move forward while others do not. Throughout it all, however, we realize that Fate does not have the last word. There is always the chance for a fresh start.

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4831.html?s=pdf>



Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

Elaine F. Bayless

Copyright © 2010 Elaine F. Bayless

ISBN 978-1-60910-244-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America.

With the exception of one story, the characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. "Forgiven" is a fictional account based on actual events.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2010

Table of Contents

Bullhorn	1
Seagull	6
The Warmth of Bulbs	18
Forgiven	20
The Love Letters.....	40
The Makeup.....	42
Unexamined Landscape	69
The Wisdom of the Bee	74
About the Author.....	127

Seagull

April aimlessly walked along the shore, her feet see-sawing with each step. It was a white-hot August day and she wore her surf shoes as protection against the molten-glass heat of the sand. She gazed out over the ocean, seeing in the ceaseless pounding of the waves her own family's life. They just kept throwing themselves forward, crashing against hard reality like the waves splashed against the sand. She sat down in the shelter of a sand dune, while overhead the gulls flew, calling out raucously.

She took off her baseball hat, a gift from her parents, and fanned her face with it. In the two months since graduation the sun had faded the green background so badly that the yellow "Class of 2050" inscription was hardly readable. She squinted out towards the horizon. She thought she might see her father out there somewhere, casting his nets over and over. She remembered past celebrations when he had brought home a big catch, but all that was over now – he hadn't caught a fish worth keeping in eight years. But he still went out there every day, determined to believe that there were fish for the catching. April got up, heading home to finish her chores.

After hanging the clothes on the line to dry, she entered the kitchen and greeted her mother, who nodded in reply. April

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

glanced at the pot of beans boiling on the stovetop and her mother hunched over the table, forming two loaves of bread. Their kitchen was wildly out of date, with just one small microwave and an old fashioned electric oven. Any house built after 2030 had double microwaves and built-in quick cookers, but electrical upgrades were expensive, and they had opted to keep their old appliances, just like their neighbors.

"Any luck with jobs?" asked her mother, as if she didn't already know the answer.

"Nope, nothing new there."

"There's some stuff for salad out, if you want to chop it."

"OK," she replied, and went over to the cutting board. The garden was producing well this year. She began cutting up the vegetables, ripping the few leaves of lettuce set out.

"The Andrews are moving."

"What? What will Dad do?"

"I don't know what he'll do. Matt's willing to sell him the garage, but he won't consider it. He'd have to give up the fishing business, and you know how he feels about that."

April continued her chopping. Yes, she knew how her father felt about the fishing business. Working at the garage was just a way to finance his passion for fishing. Her thoughts turned to her friends Claire and Rebecca, the Andrews' daughters. "Where are they moving to?"

Elaine F. Bayless

"Raleigh, maybe Clayton. Matt figures he can get a garage going again there, or at least find one to work at. He's hoping that with a little time, he'll be able to send the girls to community college."

"I thought the community college was in Durham."

Her mother shrugged as she transferred the loaves into their pans. April set the knife down.

"Mom, when is Dad going to give up?"

"April, that's no way to talk."

"Why not? Doesn't he see that everything's getting worse? This isn't working anymore. The house is falling apart, I've got no job and Jim's dropped out so he can deal. And now Dad's losing the income from the garage. None of us has a future as long as he keeps up this fishing crap."

"And what's your solution? Your father knows how to fish. It's what he does. He's not ready to give up."

April looked away, concentrating on arranging the salad in a bowl, blinking back tears of frustration.

"Exactly, there is no solution. Your dad isn't going to give up. And I notice that you won't take the opportunity right in front of you. Why won't you just move in with Aunt Mariam? She'll give you free room and board and you'll be within walking distance of Durham Tech."

April sighed but kept her eyes fixed on the salad bowl.

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

"What, you don't want to go to college? You want everyone else to change around you, but you don't want to take the first step out of here."

"Yeah, like I could just go off and leave you." Their conversation was moving onto well-worn tracks.

"Oh right, you have to stay around and hold the family together, I forgot," said her mother, sarcastically.

"Well, I do half the work around here as it is. What are you gonna do, find a way to keep Jim at home doing chores? When he can make thousands on the streets dealing drugs? Who's gonna weed the garden? Who's gonna thread your needles?"

"I'm not as helpless as you think, missy," and she turned her back on April to stir the beans.

April looked at her mother, at the hump on her back and the crippling knots on her fingers. Only 45, but her arthritis was twisting her like a pretzel. April sighed and left the room. Upstairs in her bedroom, she scanned her messages. There was a party going on tonight. Her friend Meredith had called twice. And there was a message from John, her ex-boyfriend. Her heart pounded as she read over the message. In their graduating class, John was the only one who could go to a university, the only one who wouldn't have to work his way through school, thanks to the fact that his dad was a professor

Elaine F. Bayless

at UNCW. Everyone else stayed here and searched for work, or moved inland to find jobs and attend local community colleges. Tonight was John's last night before moving to Wilmington.

She considered John's offer, knowing what would happen. They would share a vanilla mint milkshake, then walk along the beach. John would push her to move in with her Aunt Mariam and attend Durham Tech. She would argue and they would end the night in frosty silence. She decided to say yes. After all, why not have one last fight?

She and Jim met at Sammy's Diner. He bought a milkshake, vanilla mint, and they sat outside on the cracked plastic chairs to share it.

"So, are you excited?" she asked.

"Sure, of course. I wish someone else I knew was going though. I won't know anyone."

"Well, that's life."

"I wish *you* could go."

"Yeah, well, I wish there were fish in the ocean."

"Why won't you go live with your aunt? At least you could get an education."

"That wouldn't exactly help you with your problem, would it?"

"It's not all about me."

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

“Oh, come on, John. Can we skip the ‘what’s best for me’ conversation, just once?”

“No, we can’t. You’re throwing yourself away down here. Why don’t you want to leave? Go inland, get an education, get a job. It’s not like you couldn’t send money back.”

“It’s not just the money, you know my mom can barely manage now as it is.”

“And maybe by the time it gets worse you’ll have an education and a high paying job.”

“Get real. There aren’t any good paying jobs. The only thing I’m interested in is the ocean and that’s dead.” April swung around in her seat, looking out towards the beach.

John sighed. “I just don’t get you, April. You’re the only person I know who isn’t desperate to get out of this place and find a future.”

“Look, John, it’s your last night. Can we please skip the fight?”

John opened his mouth, but stayed quiet, hearing the plaintive note in her voice. It was this fight that had broken them up in the first place. He changed the subject and soon they were walking along the beach, watching the sky darken as the sun set. They carried their shoes loosely, letting the sand squish beneath their toes.

Elaine F. Bayless

A lone seagull flew over them, silhouetted by the fading sunset. It soared over the beach towards the ocean.

"Look at that thing," said John, pointing at it.

"Yeah, I guess they never lose hope, do they?" The gull reminded her of her father.

"That's one way to see it."

She sighed. That was John's standard introduction to a conflicting point. "Yes?"

"It's just instinct. They've evolved over thousands of years to get food from the ocean. Now that there's no food, some will die out, but some will adapt. We'll watch their evolution happen right in front of us." He was excited. It was as if the darker implications didn't exist in his mind.

"Yes, those of us who adapt and evolve will see it," she said, bitterly. He turned and looked at her. "John, do you ever think about the human side of things? My Dad is out there every day, just like that gull, looking for something that isn't there. How is he going to adapt? How will those of us here on the Banks adapt? Will we all die out?" She was annoyed to realize tears were streaming down her cheeks.

John said nothing until she had her self-control back. Then he grasped her shoulders, his eyes boring holes into hers.

"What?" she asked.

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

"April, you are the evolution. YOU are the adaptation. You have to leave – you have to find a new future."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"You mean you won't."

She turned away but he pulled her back. "April, what can I say that will get through to you? Your parents have made their decision, but that doesn't mean you have to make the same one. Why don't you make a future for yourself?"

She pulled free and threw her reply over her shoulder: "John, I won't talk about this tonight." She walked away from him, letting the thick water rush over her ankles, feeling the waves pull the sand from beneath her feet.

The sun had set and the stars came out slowly, shining and winking. She stared at them while listening to the roar of waves. She knew that she couldn't live without that layer of noise wrapped around her like a blanket. Without the sight of the sun rising over the ocean, the clouds gathering for storms, the hot sand shifting under her feet. No one could understand – it wasn't that she didn't want an education – it was that she didn't want to leave the ocean. April thought John was far behind her, but suddenly he put his arm around her waist and they walked in tandem, the ocean caressing their feet and ankles.

"I'm sorry, April," he said.

Elaine F. Bayless

"Forgiven," she replied. She leaned her head on his shoulder, remembering all the good times.

* * *

The next few weeks were a blur of routine. Jim's occasional visits were the only events to mark time by. Each time he appeared, he looked more and more like someone April would not want to meet in a dark alley. After each visit there was money in the bank account, money that April resented even as she bought food with it. She felt like a hamster hopelessly running in its wheel. She missed John, but each sweet susurrant of the ocean reassured her that this was her home.

In mid-September a hurricane broke the routine. So far the season had been unusually calm, but this storm, a Cat 3 named Heather, looked to be a direct hit. At breakfast as they listened to the radio, April's father looked at her and nodded.

"Guess we better get the stormboards out," he said.

"Yeah, sounds like this'll be a rough one," said April. Her mother sat in silence, worrying over Jim's safety, no doubt.

April and her father went outside to begin the arduous job of boarding the windows. The stormboard was older than April, and had already outlasted the warranty. April's father climbed the ladder first, and she followed him. She would hoist

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

the stormboard up, then hand him the corner-locks to secure it. They worked in silence for a while.

"So your mother complains to me that you could go to school," he said, breaking the silence. April raised her eyebrows.

"Sure, if I could stand living with Aunt Mariam," she replied, knowing how he felt about her aunt.

He laughed bitterly. "Your mother always thinks that this family can do anything."

"Huh?" She was struggling to hold the bulky stormboard and climb the ladder, as they were now to the second floor windows.

"Oh, you know," said her father, taking the 'board from her and positioning it. "Your mother has never been content. She thinks we're all superstars, destined for great things. Seems to think that her family is too amazing to settle for what we have here."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," replied April slowly, offering the corner-locks.

"Yep. She's always after me to quit the business and 'fulfill my potential'," he snarled, hitting the corner-locks harder than was necessary.

April felt odd suddenly, as though gravity was changing direction under her very feet. She backed down the ladder. Her

Elaine F. Bayless

father followed her and they walked around to the sea side of the house.

"What ever happened to that boyfriend of yours?" asked her father as he leaned the ladder up against the house. April turned and looked at the sea, grey and thrashing from the coming storm. Her father was full of surprises today.

"Oh, you know, we just kept fighting." The wind was fiercer now, pulling April back and forth. She handed the 'board to her father, who took a moment to make eye contact with her.

"He reminded me of your mother."

April felt the shifting sensation again, like vertigo.

"We don't need all that, do we now?" asked her father conspiratorially, reaching down for a corner-lock. She handed it to him. "Yep, we do just fine. Doing what we know, staying comfortable, that's the way to live."

April felt sick. She had fought John so hard, but wasn't John just saying to her what she had always wanted to say to her father?

They finished the windows in silence and April went to her room and spent the day there, locked into the shuttered dimness, thinking. She remembered all her fights with John, all her mother's fights with her father. She picked up her journal and wrote fiercely.

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

The storm hit around 1:00 am. Her parents had insisted she sleep downstairs with them. The first howl of wind woke them up and they huddled together in the king-sized bed. The wind grew louder, and a piece of stormboard came loose, banging against the house with an infernal rhythm. As they sat in the darkness, April thought about her life. She finally understood what John had been trying to tell her. Seagulls were stuck – they were creatures of instinct. Only a few would develop new instincts, instincts that led to life rather than to death. But she wasn't a gull. She could choose her life – could choose a different path.

A month later, she sat on the bus to Durham. She held her bag tightly in her lap and waved goodbye to her mother. Her father was already out fishing. As the bus pulled out of the station and began chugging down the road, April watched the buildings of her childhood diminish into the distance. The bus passed the dump and she saw the gulls climbing over it, pecking around, looking for food. She raised a hand in silent salute to them, as she, like they, charted a new course.

In this collection of short stories, we travel through time along the East Coast, watching people struggle with questions of love, justice, friendship and betrayal. Loneliness and love combine with environmental and ethical questions as our protagonists face their demons. Some move forward while others do not. Throughout it all, however, we realize that Fate does not have the last word. There is always the chance for a fresh start.

Birds, Bees, and Church Trailer Thieves

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4831.html?s=pdf>